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SIDNEY LANIER: AN APPRECIATION

BY J. O. VARNEDOE

It was in the early part of January, 1858, when I, a callow youth of fifteen years, having just matriculated at Oglethorpe University, was met by a student, whose acquaintance I had previously made. He invited me to his dormitory to hear some music. The invitation was gratefully accepted and sincerely appreciated. There I met, for the first time, Sidney Lanier, who was my friend's room-mate. These two then delighted me with the most entrancing music I had ever heard of that kind—Lanier with the flute and LeConte with the guitar.

I was at once impressed with Lanier's personality. Apart from the culture and moral refinement, which his face and manner indicated, there was a quiet dignity strangely unusual in one of his years. This first impression was never dissipated by a more intimate acquaintance. His calmness of demeanor did not amount to austerity. On the contrary, he was always polite and affable, though never seeking promiscuous companionship, nor courting popularity. His hair, parted on one side, was always brushed back behind his ears. His clothes were of good quality, always neat but never ostentatious. He carried himself easily and naturally, with just a suggestion of stoop in his shoulders. His gait was usually brisk. He showed no taste for athletics,—was seldom seen at the gymnasium. Music and books were his dearest companions. He did not confine himself to his text books, but read extensively. The knowledge gained from these sources was reflected in the piquancy of the essays he was required to prepare and read before his class, as well as the addresses he delivered before the student body and the public. "The Philosophy of History" I recall as the subject of his Junior address. He was at that time only sixteen years of age. His effort evinced thought and research far beyond one of his years. He was not conspicuous as a debater, and yet what he attempted was always good and creditable. Among ladies his manner was easy and

faultless; but he was not what the students called a lady's man. While uniformly dignified, he would exhibit at times a jauntiness in singular contrast with his habit.

With companions of his choice he was jolly and bright, enjoying a joke thoroughly and participating in friendly repartee. On one occasion, while engaging in this pastime he was misunderstood by one of the students, to whom he was addressing his remarks, who denounced him as a liar. Lanier immediately struck him, and the student in turn pulled his knife and stabbed him in the left side. Upon investigation by the surgeon, who was summoned, the wound was found to extend only an inch in his body. In about two weeks he was able to resume his studies.

About this time, or shortly thereafter, Lanier united with the Presbyterian Church, of which his parents were members. While not conspicuously active as a church member, he was carefully observant of the vows he had assumed, and his conduct was beyond reproach. Lanier never participated in any of the pranks indulged by some students; nor was he addicted to any of their vices.

Finding he was about to graduate at the age of seventeen, his father removed him from college after his Junior year, and secured for him a position in the postoffice at Macon, where he served as a clerk for one year. He then returned to college, and uniting with the class that was below him when he left, shared at graduation the first honor of his class.

Immediately upon graduation, Lanier was elected by the trustees to the position of tutor, the duties of which he discharged with ability and dignity, until the exercises of the college were suspended by reason of the impending war.

It is worthy of notice that, up to this time, no hint was given of the presence of the poetic fires that must have been smouldering in his soul. Of his devotion to music, his fondness for letters and his diligence along all lines of research, together with his high character and attractive personality, he had furnished ample evidence.

At the age of sixteen, we find him polite without affectation; cultured without ostentation; kind without pretension; poised without undue stiffness; conscious of his splendid gifts, yet modest withal. These were the characteristics of the boy, and they became more pronounced in the development of his wonderful career. He advanced imperially, though not arrogantly, to the first place in his class, and maintained it with royal mien. He extorted the tribute of admiration without kindling the venom of jealousy. Shams he despised. One of the distinguishing characteristics of genius is the presence of ambition. Lanier sought to excel. He was a student. He recognized the fact that wealth of gifts furnishes no royal pathway to knowledge. Conscience also, as well as ambition, impelled him to diligence. While cordial to all, he had few associates; and they were chiefly of those whose musical bias attracted his companionship. Music, rather than intellectual affinity, was the potent influence that determined the choice of his comrades. Learn from this how completely this overmastering passion held him thrall, and forced him, in after life, to forsake all other pursuits, and over the protest of his friends, follow the beckonings of his predilection. What agony he must have endured from the contention of opposing forces—the clamorous pleadings of this passion on the one hand, and the insistent demands of environment, on the other! When he returned from a Federal prison, whither he had been taken as a prisoner of war, broken in health, and stripped of all means of support, the exigency of the moment compelled him to engage in distasteful pursuits. He passed successively from a clerkship to the schoolroom, and thence to a law office; but the atmosphere of these vocations he found not only uncongenial but positively stifling. It is well for America and the world that, at this juncture, he defied all opposition, and chose a vocation in which, by his splendid gifts, he sweetened and gladdened the lives of men. It was given to him to see things that were often hidden from the vision of others. He could detect music in sounds that were not audible to the common ear. Through an alchemy unknown to the less gifted, he could

extract honey from dry bones, and feast himself upon morsels most delicious, of his own creation. The same breeze that brought nectar to his sore lungs, filled his sensitive ear with the music of cat birds, or the song of the lark. The southing of the pines or the rustling of the marshes fell upon his ear like a mother's lullaby. Nor was he dependent upon Nature's lavish gifts, wherewith to nourish his soul with entrancing delights. His own creative imagination could provide soul feasts, the exhilarating effects of which would often leave his body exhausted by the very thrill of joys, scarcely less than supernal.

Were he on a desert isle, he could feast his vision upon gardens of roses, surmounted upon the grandest mountain. What others passed by unheeded he clothed with attractive robes, and they at once became things of beauty and delight to his poetic vision. He extorted tribute from all objects and all conditions. No, not all—war, strife, hatred—he turned from these with a horror akin to that with which one regards a pest house.

"His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, This was a man."

There was in him, to use his own words, no "barbaric grab of the senses at whatever there is of sensual good in the world."

His life was pitched on a plane too lofty to find satisfaction in the gross and grovelling—these he spurns, and voices his conception of life in the beautiful "Song of the Chattahoochee"

"I am fain for to water the plain.
Downward the voices of Duty call.
Downward, to toil and be mixed with the main."

His religious views, in sympathy with his mental habits, refused to be incrustated in the stereotyped forms of orthodoxy. He invented for them simpler moulds, as when writing to his wife, he makes this statement: "Christ gathered up the ten commandments, and redistilled into the clear liquid of that

wondrous eleventh, Love God utterly and thy neighbor as thyself." Forms were nothing to him but the vehicles of devotion, love and worship.

Here we have a combination of genius and probity—of purity and strong mentality—the subordination of every faculty to the high claims of truth and virtue; and all of his splendid gifts of mind held in leash at their bidding. Beneath the generous soil that produced such a life, there must have been a rich substratum of Christian virtue, which was responsible for the moral and religious bent, evidenced in all of his writings, and made conspicuous in his private life. If he suffered more than others by reason of his sensitive nature, and the wearing disease that so early fastened itself upon him; by the same token, he felt thrills of joy seldom known to mortals. This is one of the compensations generous Nature extends to all of the afflicted sons of earth. His love for his wife was beautiful beyond compare, and in triumphant contrast with the simply tolerant estate, that so often marks that holy relationship. His song—"My Springs"—is no less a tribute to his heart than to the charming eyes of his wife. He reaches the climax in that song in the last two lines, where he says:

"I marvel that God made you mine,
For when He frowns, 'tis then ye shine."

With a body often tortured with pain, and unceasingly depressed by a relentless disease, there was superadded oftentimes the harrying consequences of poverty. Yet, in these despites, his wife was never forgotten. When separated from his companionship, as was often the case, she was regularly the recipient of messages of tenderest love and encouragement.

As has been suggested, music became to him a passion, and held him enthralled, as a charmer holds his victim. To him music had a language, passionate, pure and sweet, which none could interpret better and which he constantly employed as a vehicle for his thoughts, his aspirations, his hopes, his fears, and his emotions. To ears prosaic that language is unintelligible, but to his it was as luminous and sweet as an

angelic whisper. In fact he did not hesitate to trace its origin to Divinity; as when he writes: "Music means harmony, harmony means love, and love—is God."

It has been suggested that his poetic genius was the offspring of this passion for music that so held his soul in vassalage. However this may be, certain it is that the interblending of these superb gifts gave a character unique to the exercise of either. The critics have attempted to disparage Lanier, by comparing him with Whittier, Longfellow and others. Such comparisons are not only odious but unjust. Lanier's genius blazed its own way, and compelled him to ignore the technique observed by his predecessors and contemporaries. It has been claimed for his contemporaries and others, that they were the poets of the people; Lanier was the poet of poets. His genius scorned beaten tracks. Others may follow, but he must choose paths of his own creation. For this reason, Time alone can justly fix his place in the galaxy of poets. Let us not forget that that genius of war—Napoleon—discarded all established rules, and by that token, won his brilliant victories.

It is noticeable that, while carping critics are endeavoring to rob him of his well-earned repute, Time is weaving a chaplet of imperishable renown, wherewith to crown him. His poems have already been adopted as a text book in some of the educational institutions of England. His supremacy as a musician is unchallenged, and his primacy among American poets is being more firmly established, as the years go by. His scintillant genius will radiate with increasing sheen adown the corridors of time. Gifted son of Georgia, Poet, Musician, Comrade; hail and farewell,

"Until the day dawn and the shadows flee away."